

EXPLORING ISLAMIC DISCOURSE EXPOSURE IN TERTIARY LEVEL MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Muslims around the globe are multicultural, from different age range, and from multi socioeconomic backgrounds. This highlights the importance of exploring the lingua franca of the multilingual Muslims in communicating Islamic related genres in multiple forms of discourses. Currently, studies exploring how Malaysian multilingual tertiary level students approach Islamic spoken and written discourses, have been insufficiently limited. In relation to this, appropriateness, aptness, unambiguousness of interpretation, and clarity of comprehensibility of English as a second language are pragmatic aspects to be scrutinised in examining multilingual ESL language users. This study aims to analyse tertiary level Malaysian ESL learners' linguistics and semiotics interpretations of Islamic lectures in English medium. A total of 30 infographic materials developed by tertiary level Malaysian ESL learners were analysed in terms of their language and graphic representations of what they have aurally perceived. These infographic materials correspond to the learners' understanding of Islamic English lectures discussing on supplication, repentance, the End Time, and matters of the heart. The findings show that in *tassawuf* (process of realizing ethical and spiritual ideals) related matters, the ESL learners tend to represent their understanding more linguistically rather than visually. This is related to the intangible elements of this subject matter, which limit in signifying the depictions of what is comprehended and interpreted.

Keywords: Intercultural Pragmatics, English as a Second Language for Advanced Learners, Islamic Discourse

Introduction

As of year 2020, about one fourth of the world population are Muslims. This implicates that the Muslims around the world are of different ethnic, economic, age, and gender backgrounds sharing the same religious belief. Muslims in the Malaysian multiethnic nation are mostly multilingual. The majority Malay Muslims in Malaysia are native speakers of their own colloquial Malay language variety and use English as the second language (ESL). Some Malay Muslims may have proficiency in Arabic, but most of the Malay Muslims only use Arabic in spiritual Islamic ritual activities in verbal recitation without holistic linguistic ability. English is taught in Malaysian government schools and higher learning institutions. English is also the medium for a number institutions, organisations and companies in Malaysia.

According to The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) global scales, language users at the elementary level should be able to communicate about their daily routines and familiar matters. It is important to highlight that Islam emphasises that religion is a part of life of a practicing believer. Islam promotes specific way of life in every aspects of daily routine for any individual from any background. Hence, from this notion, Malay Muslim ESL learners should also be able to communicate about Islamic related matters in the second language.

Recent applied linguistics studies on multilingual Muslims have mainly focused on their language choice in certain contexts. A study in an Indonesian multilingual Islamic learning institution highlighted that the unconscious language choice of the teachers in their classroom sessions are based on their objective to engage the students in the learning sessions (Bin Tahir, 2017). A study on multilingual Arabs in Canada related that the Arab participants have affirmative attitudes towards their language repertoires: Arabic, English and French. The Arabs use their native language at home with their family members and for religious activities. Similar to other multilingual contexts, they opt to the official language of their state; English and French in government offices and education institutions (Dweik and Qawar, 2015). A similar study on Arabs, but in India, also showed similar norms of code-switching and code-mixing among bilinguals who share the same native language (Alkhreshah, 2015). According to a case study in an Australian school, Muslims with limited English proficiency find it challenging in peer studying at school. These minority Muslim students with limited English proficiency find it helpful if an intermediate can assist them in explaining about their religious background and needs at school (Scarino et.al, 2015).

Although studying language choice is important, researchers in applied linguistics ought to explore more on the performance of second language users in multilingual contexts. For this reason, this paper has aimed to explore the Malaysian Muslim ESL learners' language performance in explaining about Islamic related matters in their second language. The scope of the study has covered analysing tertiary level Malaysian ESL learners' linguistics and semiotics interpretations of Islamic lectures in English medium. Exploring the ESL learners' intelligibility in their second language performance is more than just looking at their ability in having correct pronunciation, lexis and grammar (Smith and Nelson, 2019). Other elements such as recognising lexical items, understanding the direct meaning of lexical items, and understanding the illocutionary force of lexical items are significant in achieving language proficiency.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach in analysing 30 infographic materials developed by Malaysian Muslim ESL learners who were undertaking their tertiary level studies at a Malaysian higher learning institution. The English language proficiency level of the participants during the study was within the range of CEFR A1 to B2 scale. The ESL learners were assigned to listen to and extract main ideas from Islamic lectures by English speaking figures: Sheikh Yasir Qadhi, Sheikh Nouman Ali, and Sheikh Bilal Asad. The topics of the Islamic lectures are on supplication, repentance, the End Time, and matters of the heart. The task was specifically transferring information from spoken to written form. The English lectures of these speakers were available on YouTube video sharing site during the time of the study. The reason of choosing these Islamic speakers over the others is because of their native-like English elocution and enunciation. It is

noted that the speakers code-mix in English and Arabic in their lectures because of the Islamic discourse nature. It is highlighted that a speech is not categorised as an Islamic lecture if there is no Arabic present at all.

The analysis of the infographic materials focused on the text and visual graphics reflected in the representation of the participants' listening comprehension of the Islamic lectures. The analysis explored how the participants create and communicate linguistic and visual meaning of their understanding of the Islamic lectures in English. In the process of the analysis, semantic; syntactical; and pragmatics elements have been interrelated (Saussure, 1983).

Findings

The overall analysis showed that the infographic representations of the main ideas extracted from the English Islamic lectures produced by the tertiary level Malaysian Muslim ESL learners are in align to their belief of the Islamic teachings. The infographics produced by the participants reflected more textual information compared to visual information. The topics of the English Islamic lectures that they were exposed to are all distinctively related to the Islamic belief system. For instance, Islam provides specific guidance in performing the acts of supplication, prayers, and repentance. Muslims also have faith in the unseen and the concept of predestination that the One and only divine God knows everything.

In the participants' information transfer from the spoken discourse, the lexical representations of the divine were generally exact in terms of differentiating between God and His creations. This implicates that the ESL learners were able to semantically and pragmatically comprehend the divine messages communicated in the English Islamic lectures. The participants' infographics clearly showed that the directive speech acts of command are from the unseen divine interlocutor, even though the lectures were delivered by human speakers. In the infographics, this can be seen in the extracts of the Quran verses that Muslim regard as the holy words of the divine. The extracts of Prophet Muhammad's sayings (*Hadith*) provided in the infographics were also extracts that can be seen as directives from the divine. This phenomenon is not uncommon in the Islamic discourse, because in whatever language an Islamic discourse is delivered; the Quran and *Hadith* must be hand-in-hand referred to.

In the analysis of the tertiary level Malaysian Muslim ESL learners' infographics of the main ideas extracted from the English Islamic lectures, syntactical errors were present in terms of subject-verb-agreement rule and the use of tenses. The language errors are purely in terms of linguistics, not the participants' understanding of their Islamic belief. For example, the error of stating 'Allah have...' is a common verb-agreement error of Malaysian ESL learners in general. The participants of the study clearly know, understand, and accept the concept of the oneness of God. The use of the plural 'have' does not indicate that they semantically and pragmatically associate polytheism in their belief. Misuse of tenses was present in the infographics of the participants in their description of God's actions. An example of this is the misuse of the simple past auxiliary verb 'was' in stating 'Allah was forgiving...' to explain that God is always forgiving if one is to repent his or her misdeeds. This interlanguage misuse however does not indicate that the participants assume that God only forgave in the past, because it is clearly understood in the Islamic teachings that Allah is always All-forgiving.

From the analysis of the participants' infographics, graphic representations of the main ideas transferred from the Islamic lectures showed no physical visual depictions of God and Prophet Muhammad. It is understood that any Islamic discourse would be associated to the Divine and to Prophet Muhammad. However, unlike the western English-speaking culture, the Muslim ESL learners of this study did not replicate the native English pragmatic norms in communicating their understanding of their belief in God and the prophets. In representing their understanding of the related English terms related to prayers and repentance which are heavily associated to communication with god, the participants only visually portrayed one party, which is the sender in the communication process. The related visual representations of the term 'prayer'; 'repent'; and 'repentance' found in the analysis were pictures of a person prostrating, a person raising hands supplicating, and a person in grief crying. These visuals found are all depictions of the source or sender of the communication process. There were no depictions of the intangible Divine Receiver. This implicates that the Muslim ESL learners are pragmatically aware of implying their understanding of the Divinity even in their second language.

Conclusion

The findings of the study implicate that Malaysian Muslim multilingual tertiary level students have shown the ability to integrate their Islamic belief knowledge of the Divinity in English as their second language. The ability to distinguish between the native English pragmatic norms and the ESL learners' Islamic context can be considered as part of the emergence process of localised varieties of English when both elements of knowledge are integrated. The common language inaccuracies produced by the Malaysian Muslim ESL learners at the upper intermediate level in expressing their understanding of the Islamic teachings point to the requirement to increase the exposure of English Islamic discourse materials in ESL learning sessions. Further research should explore the language choice of Multilingual Muslims in communicating about Islamic related matters in their native tongue, second language and Arabic. This is because; there are certain circumstances that require Arabic language in Islamic discourses.

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